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McCarthy, Eugene

CIA Probe: Grandstanding?

It's hard to escape the suspicion that those senators demanding an investigation of the Central Intelligence Agency are making a grandstand play for publicity.

Sen. Eugene McCarthy, D-Minn., is the latest to propose such a probe. The Minnesota Democrat and some other well-known liberals feel the CIA has an improper impact on foreign policy.

McCarthy charges that there is reason to believe that the agency "not only carries out policy, but in some respects, it has become a positive and significant influence on the policy itself."

We would hope so. If the intelligence gathered by this country's agents is not carefully weighed in formulating U.S. foreign policy, the Johnson Administration is neglecting its duty. And the argument that the CIA is drafting official policy can only be interpreted as a slap at the President and the State Department.

The CIA is primarily an information-gathering agency, vital to this nation's security. But the President and his State Department have the responsibility for using this intelligence as a guide for policy decisions. If he is delegating the authority to make these decisions to others, then McCarthy is aiming his criticism at the wrong target.

The call for a probe of the CIA no doubt will win approving yelps from those who seek to discredit any arm of the U.S. government related to defense or security.

But we fail to see what a full-dress inquiry could accomplish, nor does it seem fair. The CIA cannot fight back publicly against its critics.

And, because of the super-secret activities of the agency, we presume the congressional investigators would be equally bound to silence to avoid com-

promising the nation's security or embarrassing U.S. policy-makers at a time when there is a concerted effort to discredit this nation's foreign policy all over the world.

The CIA probably has made blunders. No agency is infallible. But it cannot make any public explanations nor can it advertise its successes because of the sensitive nature of its activities, which admittedly include clandestine operations. Information on the CIA is so closely guarded that its payrolls and operating funds are hidden in other annual appropriations. Even the names of its employees are classified.

But this would not, we submit, rule out a review of its operations through private briefings. Presumably, President Johnson would readily make such briefings available to key lawmakers such as Sen. McCarthy. Furthermore, Congress already does check into the President's appropriations, including those for the CIA and undoubtedly the Johnson Administration would expand the fiscal screening if Congress feels insufficient information has been provided.

But if the CIA has exceeded its authority, either in decision-making or spending, it would seem to be a matter to be taken up with the Executive Branch. After all, it is only one of a number of government agencies which by law are subservient to the President and his policy-makers.

Whatever inquiry that is made into the CIA should be directed to the Administration. And this must, of necessity, be done cautiously to avoid undermining the effectiveness of the CIA's activities. We hope President Johnson is successful in pointing this out to the Senate critics of the agency.